



BUSINESS / BOOKS

The Elephant in the Room

How business autobiographies deal with caste



ILLUSTRATION BY SUKRUTI ANAH STANELEY

AKSHAT JAIN

AMONG THE MANY throwaway lines about hard work in the industrialist Narotam Sekhsaria's autobiography *The Ambuja Story*, are those that portray his ethos as being rooted within the Marwari community: "Whatever my degree, my eventual destination was my family business. ... it would not have startled anyone in our Marwari community. Our minds are wired to work for ourselves. The idea of working for others was an alien concept even then." He remembers being told by "industry insiders" that the late industrialist Ratan Tata had been impressed by the runaway success of Ambuja Cement, and also recalls snippets of general conversation that were quoted back to him: "Yeh Marwari hai, ethical hai, efficient hai." Yet, as the book's subtitle—"How a group of ordinary men built an extraordinary company"—suggests, aggrandisement of the community sits alongside a professed humility about the author's origins.

This makes several of the book's statements appear paradoxical at best, and myopic about privilege at worst. Sekhsaria writes, "Who knew we would do so much so quickly? I still wonder sometimes. How did we, a bunch of relative newcomers, build India's most successful cement company in a little over a decade? ... There was nothing in my family's past or in mine that foretold the future the way it unfolded." A page later, though, he narrates the history of his family, which had been in business for generations: "My forefathers were brokers and commission agents who dealt in commodities, including cotton, bullion and oil." His great-grandfather had bought a house in South Bombay in the 1940s, and the family had a two-storey office building in Kalbadevi, which was "a few minutes away from the iconic Bombay Cotton Exchange." At another point, he writes: "The Bajajs, like us, had started as traders in Shekhawati. ... I consider myself lucky to have grown up in proximity to such an illustrious family. I am sure I imbibed a lot from them and from what I heard about them. Rahul *bhaiya*, with his education, his early success with Bajaj Scooters and even his good looks and charismatic nature, was an early inspiration for me."

What, then, makes him a relative newcomer to the business world? Or, more precisely, who is he styling himself as a newcomer in relation to—the Bajaj family? That could be why, even though he has lived in one of the most elite neighbourhoods of Mumbai and went to one of the city's most elite schools, he feels the need to point out that the haveli he was born in was a "relatively simple" one in comparison with others in the vicinity: "In our daily lives, we were surrounded by wealthy and successful people and I was constantly reminded of our relative inadequacies ... We were looked down upon by those who were wealthier and more successful, especially at community gatherings."

Sekhsaria is not alone among India's business leaders in underscoring the inherent ordinariness of his family or origins. According to the businessman Anil Rai Gupta, writing in *Havells: The Untold Story of Qimat Rai Gupta*, his father had modest beginnings, despite having been able to purchase a house in Delhi in the 1960s. He writes that his mother had Rs 800 for household expenses every month but was "barely able to make ends meet."

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